An Italian Hero for China. Reading Marco Polo in the Fascist Era

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Abstract: This article offers an overview of the readings of Marco Polo's ventures offered to the Italian public opinion during the Fascist era. Marco Polo's image was adapted to the needs of patriotic pedagogy, propaganda of Fascist values and colonial aspirations, and the attempt to redefine Rome's political, economic and cultural role in the world. In a complex mix of academic and popular readings, the official discourse transformed the Venetian traveller into a symbol of Italianness in China in order to legitimize Fascist Italy's ambitions and expectations and stress its distinct identity in comparison with the other western powers. Although Chinese reception of this discourse was limited by several factors at that time, this process certainly helped establish Marco Polo's iconic significance in Sino-Italian cultural diplomacy well into the twentieth century.

Keywords: Marco Polo, China and Italy, Fascist propaganda, Italian travel literature, Italian nationalism

In 1881, when the Third Congress of the Italian Geographical Society took place in Venice, visitors had the chance to admire a statue imported from Canton in China, supposedly portraying one of Venice's most famous personalities, Marco Polo. The statue, currently in Museo Correr in St Mark's Square, was a copy of the original one kept and used as an object of worship—a westerner among the *arhats*—in the Hualin Buddhist temple in Canton, known in the West as the Temple of the Five Hundred Gods.

While the statue seemed to portray a westerner, it had no specific features proving that it was in fact the Venetian traveller. However, the assumption that Marco Polo was considered a local god in China was appealing to Italian nationalist sentiment. And so the *Gazzetta del Regno d'Italia* proudly reported the following description from the *Gazzetta di Venezia*:

> Il nostro famoso viaggiatore è vestito alla cinese col manto però e col cappello alla foggia europea. Egli è seduto, ha i mustacchi e la barba a collare, dipinti in bleu scuro, e la sua fisonomia dimostra evidentemente di non avere il carattere mongolo, sebbene l'artista cinese vi abbia naturalmente impresso un tono e un'impronta particolare. Davanti al seggiolone rosso sul quale Marco Polo è seduto, c'è un vaso di porcellana dove si depongono i profumi, perché egli è

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> venerato come un genio tutelare della Cina nel tempio di Canton; e sotto vi è l'iscrizione in lingua cinese (*Gazzetta ufficiale del Regno d'Italia* 1881).[1]

Nonetheless, its attribution already carried some doubt. As early as the 1870s, western observers in China had reported the information with scepticism. In his *Walks in Canton*, published in 1875, John Henry Gray, archbishop of Hong Kong, affirmed that this story had been told by a "writer", but that the information was not grounded on any evidence (Gray 1875, 206). French Orientalists were sceptical as well (*Revue de l'Extrême-Orient* 1882). In Italy, doubts among experts on China were reported by the press. For example, the *Nuova Antologia di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti* (Protonari 1882, 380) mentioned the opinion of Samuel Beal, professor of Chinese at the University College of London and expert on the Silk Road. According to Beal, the statue was rather the effigy of Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier (Francesco Saverio), who had died on Shangchuan Island, close to Guangdong, in 1552 before managing to touch Chinese soil.

In spite of all these scholarly discussions, in Italy, the idea that Marco Polo was considered a divinity in Canton was echoed in travelogues and reports about China for a long time, with voices in support of this theory reported as evidence (*Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana* 1891, 608). Indeed, this notion mirrored the importance symbolically attributed to Polo's legacy and fame as an auspicious omen for the Italian presence in China and a heroic symbol of Italianness in the East.

A few years before the arrival of the statue in Venice, the Italian colonial enterprise had been extended to China, with disappointing results. After the conclusion of a commercial treaty in 1866, Italy's trade with China had not increased as hoped, and the kingdom's diplomatic power had remained marginal, as shown by its incapacity to affirm its role in protecting Catholic missions to the Chinese Empire. In addition, at the end of the nineteenth century, Italy's request for a concession in Sanmen Bay was refused by the Qing Court, marking a great diplomatic defeat. The perspective was only changed by Italy's participation in the Boxer Expedition in 1900, when it obtained its only colonial outpost in East Asia, in the Port of Tianjin (Francioni 2004; Samarani and De Giorgi 2011). In the search for an auspicious omen in the midst of these mixed fortunes, the name of the Venetian merchant was inevitably connected to Italy's enterprise in the East: the first armoured cruiser of the Regia Marina destined for East Asia in the 1890s and launched in 1892 was named "Marco Polo". The warship served along the Chinese coast for 20 years before being decommissioned in the early 1920s. Similarly, during the Tianjin concession, Marco Polo's

1 "Our famous traveller is dressed in the Chinese style, but he wears a mantle and a hat in the European style. He is seated, he has a moustache and a collar beard, painted in dark blue, and his features are evidently not Mongolian, although the Chinese artist has naturally given it a tone and a particular imprint. In front of the tall red chair on which Marco Polo is sitting, there is a porcelain vase where a visitor can put incense, because he is revered as a tutelary genius of China in the temple of Canton: and below there is an inscription in Chinese."

legitimized presence was immediately recalled at the spatial level, as the main street was named after him in the first regulatory plan of 1905.

The symbolic importance attributed to Marco Polo in the context of Italy's expected role in China comes as no surprise. Rather, it is just one facet of the complex spread of his fame in western Europe and Italy after he wrote *The Travels*. As one of the most iconic books in European cultural history for centuries, Marco Polo's work had had a profound effect on western geographical knowledge and its approach to the world since the end of the Middle Ages (Larner 1999). His *Travels* had helped to establish the European genre of travel writing, with its emphasis on the heroic individual's ordeals and triumphs (Kennedy 2013, 3). In the age of European imperialism, through the convergence of racial ideologies, colonial policies, Orientalism and the emerging mass culture, Marco Polo was increasingly evoked as a model and precursor of the western modern self's relation with the Orient.

Part of the afterlife of *The Travels* is constituted by the Italian discourse on Marco Polo during the Fascist era. The process to make him a fetish of Italy's primacy and peculiarity in western relations with the "Orient" marked a step towards Marco Polo's transformation into one of the main and most popular icons in cultural diplomacy between Italy and China.

1. The Italianness of Marco Polo

The cultural history of Marco Polo's *Travels* in the West is deeply intertwined with its textual history, and the complex mix of languages and versions addressing different audiences in Europe (Larner 1999). Although Rustichello's original manuscript was lost, it is known that the first version of Marco Polo's narrative was written in Franco-Venetian, probably in 1298–1299. As early as the beginning of the fourteenth century, the book was translated into Old French—in 1307, a copy was donated to the nobleman Thibault de Chepoy, who passed through Venice as part of Prince Charles de Valois' envoy to regain control of Constantinople—as well as into Latin by Pipino, in order to satisfy the interest expressed by Dominican monks.

Several copies of manuscripts in Latin, French, Tuscan and Venetian have been preserved in European libraries, but it was the invention of the press that widened the book's diffusion and prompted the production of critical editions by humanists, such as Giovanni Battista Ramusio's Italian translation in the second volume of his *Delle Navigationi et Viaggi* (1559). From the early modern era onwards, editions in multiple western languages were printed and began to circulate in Europe. At once a romance, book about the wonders of the world, geographical treatise and trade manual, over time, the reading of *The Travels* has not only reflected different needs but has also raised divergent feedback, ranging from celebration of its inspiring usefulness as a geographical source, to a kind of disdain and consideration as a work of fantasy and invention.

Its relevance in the development of modern geographical knowledge and exploration is often acknowledged as it was among the books read by Christopher Co-

lumbus. At the same time, in the seventeenth century, when the Jesuit missionaries became the principal suppliers of information about the East in Europe, doubts were cast on the factuality of Marco Polo's presence in China, as it was pointed out how many important features, such as the Great Wall, had apparently not been noticed by the Venetian merchant during his long stay there (Larner 1999, 171–75).

Though the importance of Marco Polo's *Travels* as a primary source of geographical information apparently began to wane after the development of stronger contacts with China in the modern period, the appeal connected to his experience in alien and exotic lands remained. As "exploration came to assume a mythic status in the European mind, serving as the harbinger of Europe's triumphal entry onto the world stage" and "became bound up with European notions of the modern" (Kennedy 2013, 1), Marco Polo's fame was destined not to fade. For example, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European exploration of the remote areas of central Asia still made reference to the information conveyed in his book (Larner 1999, 179; Stewart 2013).

Nevertheless, modern readings of Marco Polo's *Travels* were becoming increasingly connected to other fields of study, such as philology and sinology, too (Lanciotti 2004). Since the Renaissance, the book had never stopped being the object of literary and philological studies that sought to reconstruct its textual history, understand the context behind its production and verify the credibility of the experiences told in its pages—in what Larner calls the "Polo-scholarship industry" (Larner 1999, 171). At the same time, modern western sinology looked towards studies on Marco Polo as a field in which it could display its role in multidisciplinary research on China (Lanciotti 2006).

As has been the case since its origins, and in the age of competing European nationalisms and imperialisms, however, approaches to Marco Polo's book were shaped by factors different from pure scholarly curiosity and engagement. From the nineteenth century onwards, "each of the states involved in this enterprise had its own explorers to honor and celebrate" and "claim as their own" (Kennedy 2013, 1). While the academic study of *The Travels* remained transnational, it was not exempt from perhaps not always explicit nationalist bias. The lasting fortunes of *The Travels* have been tied to the subtle self-identification with the author that colonial officers, ethnographers and explorers of Asia were able to produce through their own readings of the book. As Larner noticed, their works on the text made "everything in the Book still alive and in some way contemporary" (1999, 180), in the manner of erudite translations often aimed at assessing the geographical truth of what Polo wrote. However, the actualization of the book also resulted in the projection of modern identities onto its author. If Polo's true voice as a medieval man was absent from the book, this offered the possibility of creating a modern Marco Polo, mirroring different concerns each time.

Daniela Rando's research on the construction of medieval Venice in modernity (Rando 2014) offers a compelling portrait of the complex and often contradictory interpretations of Marco Polo's "western" identity produced in the field of Orientalism between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century.

Basically split between the image of an explorer and scientist on the one hand and an administrator and officer on the other, these representations of Polo reflected the impact of colonial ideology on European Orientalism. Thus, the reading put together by Frenchman Guillaume Pauthier in his 1865 work (Polo 1865) emphasizes Marco Polo's experience and talent as an administrator for the Chinese emperor (also highlighting his "Frenchness", rational attitude and bureaucratic *habitus*). However, a few years later, in his 1871 English translation, which would also be a great success in Italy, long-serving colonial officer in British Asia, Colonel Henry Yule, preferred to underline Polo's role as a precursor of the great explorations of the modern and contemporary age and proto-ethnographer in spite of the errors and evident gaps in his report.

It is worth noting that Yule actually completed the second edition of his work in 1875, during a long stay in Palermo (after having left active service in India due to his wife's illness), dedicating the volume to Queen Margherita di Savoia. In the words of the editor, the book concerned "the life and work of a renowned Italian" (Polo 1875, XX). Later, Yule's version was used by sinologist Henri Cordier for his edition (Polo 1903).

In Italy, however, textual and literary research on the book also served to affirm its importance in the Italian literary tradition. The profile of Polian studies was basically shaped by the philological and textual interests in national literary history of mainly Florence- and Venice-based scholars. To mention just some of the authors: in 1827, in Florence, Giovanni Battista Baldelli Boni (1776–1831) edited his *Viaggi di Marco Polo illustrati e commentati* based on a Tuscan version (Baldelli Boni 1827); in 1847, in Venice, Ludovico Pasini edited Vincenzo Lazari's translation and critical edition (Polo 1847); later in 1863, Adolfo Bartoli (1833–1894) published his *I viaggi di Marco Polo secondo la lezione del codice magliabechiano più antico reintegrati con il testo francese a stampa* (Polo 1863), which was dedicated to Nicolò Tommaseo.

Italian philological research on Marco Polo's book actually reached its peak in the twentieth century. This culmination was represented by the authoritative edition of *The Travels* by Luigi Foscolo Benedetto (1886–1966), who had worked on more than 70 manuscripts, consulted in libraries in Italy and Europe, and based his reconstruction on a manuscript recently discovered in Milan. An eminent scholar of French literature who became president of the Accademia della Crusca after the Second World War, Benedetto published his critical edition *Il Milione di Marco Polo* in 1928 (Polo 1928a), an English translation (*The Travels of Marco Polo*) in 1931 and a modern Italian translation in 1932, titled *Il libro di messer Marco Polo cittadino di Venezia detto Milione dove si raccontano le meraviglie dei mondo* (Polo 1931, 1932).

Benedetto's work was explicitly promoted as both a "national" and "scientific" milestone in the affirmation of Italy's centrality in Polian studies. Benedetto's approach to *The Travels* was focused on the search for the original text, but was also imbued with patriotic feelings, celebrating the "scientific" quality of Polo's approach to the subject, but also his "virility", "sober heroism" and "boldness" (Rando 2014, 377).

The Italian discourse around Marco Polo and his enterprise in Asia actually developed at the crossroads of academic research, popular and educational literature, travel journalism and political propaganda, each area being contaminated by the others.

While the cultural climate surrounding the academic study of Marco Polo's book in Italy was mainly shaped by its intellectual importance in the Italian literary tradition, there was also a broader concern about his legacy as a model of Italian virtues and an inspiration for nationalist pride. In the Venetian Republic, the diffusion of the book and the fame of its author had already received official support from the local educated and political elites as a marker of the city's identity since Renaissance times. In nineteenth-century Italy, both before and after unification, Marco Polo was one of the many names included in the patriotic pantheon as a model of national virtues and a new hero of the nation.

The process of the divulgation of Marco Polo's ventures in literary anthologies, popular literature and the press shifted attention away from the book's importance as a description of exotic places to the celebration of the figure of Marco Polo himself. These publications include Placido Giacinto Zurla's short biography of Marco Polo included in the 1841 edition of *Iconografia italiana degli uomini e delle donne celebri* (Zurla 1841), or the biography in *Il libro dell'emulazione. I fanciulli celebri d'Italia e l'infanzia degli illustri italiani*, edited by Francesco Berlan in 1875 (*Libro dell'emulazione*, 156), which mentioned Marco Polo as a navigator and underlined his young age at the time of his travels as an inspiration for Italian youngsters.

2. Fascist discourse on Marco Polo and Italy's role in China

In the Fascist era, the myth of Marco Polo as a heroic symbol of Italianness was also shaped by new political and ideological concerns. Increasingly imbued with nationalist feelings and not devoid of a sense of retaliation towards the cultural, political and economic hegemony in East Asia of other western countries such as the United Kingdom and France, the book began to be read and its author appreciated in new forms in the context of popular education, travel journalism and propaganda. Besides the nationalistic pedagogy, the cult of the new Fascist man and the claim to Italy's primacy in western culture and relations with the Orient contributed to Marco Polo's romanticized role as a heroic representative of the destiny of the Italian race in the Far East.

It goes without saying that the book continued to be read as an adventure tale and, at the same time, an educational work. Popular books published in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, suggest that its appeal was still tied to its exoticism as well as its supposed value in offering a virtuous model for the Italian youth.

The book on Marco Polo in the series *I grandi viaggi di esplorazione*, edited by Ettore Fabietti (1876–1962) for Paravia in 1924, is a perfect example of this. Fabietti had a long career in the popularization of literature and knowledge, beginning in the early twentieth century. In his words, the series had to address the interests of youths and common people, who had a preference for adventure

and the exotic, since "l'esploratore è l'eroe popolare per eccellenza" (Fabietti 1924, 1).[2] The first volume was dedicated to Marco Polo and written by Ranieri Allulli, a prolific writer whose speciality was biographies and didactic literature (Allulli 1924). In 1928, the author also edited Marco Polo's book for a popular series on *Viaggi e Scoperte di Esploratori e Navigatori Italiani* published by Alpes (Polo 1928b). Both books were reprinted several times even after the end of the Second World War.

Allulli dedicated his biography of Marco Polo to his son Enrico "capo pattuglia nel sodalizio milanese Ragazzi Pionieri Italiani", while defining the Venetian as "italiano grandissimo esploratore degli esploratori" (1924, I).[3] The biography was essentially a romance, focusing on the adventurous life of Polo in China and the fabulous Orient. It told all the traditional anecdotes, including the popular story of the banquet organized for his sceptical relatives and friends after his return to Venice, an unproven tale which was actually relayed by Ramusio.

Similarly, in 1931, Vallardi published a richly illustrated edition of *I meravigliosi viaggi di Marco Polo* by Luigi Rinaldi, whose writing career was focused on popular adaptations of travel literature and novels. Rinaldi's book was again in fact just a tale of adventures in exotic lands, flavoured by a sentimental emphasis on the hero's nostalgia for Venice and his homeland (Rinaldi 1931). As an aside, Rinaldi was also author of a biography of Christopher Columbus, another explorer whose Italianness began to be heavily reclaimed as instrumental to patriotic pedagogy in the nineteenth century (Rosso 2021).

In line with the regime's propagandistic readings driven by mass nationalistic pedagogy, Marco Polo's ties to his homeland were an important facet of the popular narratives. This was also linked to the new Fascist foreign policy, which sought to expand Italy's culture abroad and include migration in the definition of Italy's global role. This new attitude also affected the strategy towards China. In this context, the celebration of Marco Polo—the first westerner in China able to build a special and friendly relationship with the empire for the sake of his Venice—was connected to the hope of strengthening Italy's position in East Asia.

In the late 1920s and the 1930s, Mussolini's government attempted to redefine Italy's role in the world geopolitical landscape by changing the perception of Italy not only in the region of the Mediterranean Sea and Africa, but also in China and East Asia, where it promoted a more intense diplomatic activism. The goal was to target the Chinese public opinion's perception of Italy as occupying a marginal position in comparison with the other European powers, in spite of it being one of the countries benefitting from the "unequal treaties" after the Opium War which had led to the legal foundation of western imperialism in the area. Moreover, if Italy's foreign policy in the area had been traditionally aligned with Great Britain's approach to all issues concerning East Asia, at the

2 "[...] the explorer is the popular hero par excellence".

3 "[...] patrol leader of the Milan's Young Italian Pioneers [...] a great Italian, the explorer among the explorers".

end of the 1920s Mussolini aimed to shift Rome's attitude and pave the way for more intense, though short-lived, cooperation with China (Samarani and De Giorgi 2011; Lasagni 2019).

This change of attitude also derived from a perception of crisis in old European colonialism due to rising Chinese nationalism. In 1928, Italy and the Republic of China signed a new treaty in which Italy recognized China's customs autonomy and agreed to a future abolition of extraterritorial rights, which had been the most significant provision made by the unequal treaties. However, in the same year, the establishment of a new government in China under the leadership of the Nationalist Party unified the country, offering new challenges and opportunities. The Chinese Nationalists, whose main leader was General Chiang Kai-shek, looked abroad for technical advice in terms of modernization plans but at the same time decided to restore China's sovereignty in economic and cultural affairs. In this context, Rome gained greater room for manoeuvre due to the diplomatic activism of Mussolini's son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano, first consul and then minister in China from 1930 to 1933 (Moccia 2014). In 1934, the relationship between the two countries entered a new stage with the elevation of the respective legations to the rank of embassies.

At the same time as cooperation between nationalist China and Italy set out to boost Italian industry's support of Chinese development, some Chinese intellectual and political circles showed a political and ideological interest in Italian Fascism, as Mussolini's Italy posited itself as a model for modernity based on a strong state, authoritarian nationalist culture and state-organized mobilization. This nourished some Chinese interest in Fascist corporatism and traced a pathway for more intense cultural diplomacy between the two countries. Small Italian communities in Chinese cities were invited to play their part, as shown by the establishment of Fascist Party associations and branches there (Lasagni 2019). The goal became to regain primacy in cultural relations with China vis-à-vis other western powers and expand Italy's economic presence. In 1933, Italian cultural diplomacy towards Asia was specifically enhanced by the foundation of the Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO) in Rome. IsMEO, directed by Giovanni Gentile, aimed to become a scholarly and educational institution in the field of oriental studies, as well as an instrument to improve Italy's capacity to weave cultural relations with governments in that area (Ferretti 1986; Crisanti 2020, 178–210). Not surprisingly, considering the importance attributed to geographical and ethnological explorations in its mission, Polian studies became a topic of interest for IsMEO (Almagià 1938).

In this context, Marco Polo was attributed new meanings as a role model. The first westerner in Asia, his legacy could not be downplayed now that Italy was launching new explorations of those remote areas, such as those organized and led by Giuseppe Tucci (Crisanti 2020, 211–300). But Marco Polo was also to be the symbol of a distinct Italian attitude towards Asia, presented as being based on cooperation and peaceful relations. The historical experience of the "Italian" Marco Polo was to help legitimize Italy's claim to be a friendly and supportive western power in the eyes of the Chinese nationalists too.

The speeches given at the inauguration of IsMEO offer some insights into this new approach. On this occasion, for example, Mussolini himself emphasized the connection between culture and trade in Italian relations with the Orient, suggesting that Rome's new political strategy in the area was founded on the acknowledgment of the Asian people's dignity and traditions (V. V. and U. F. 1934: Crisanti 2020, 198–99). Similarly, when addressing Asian students from European universities invited to Italy in December 1933, the Duce stressed how Italy's relations with Asia were historically successful as they were based on mutual equality and respect (Lasagni 2019). In his words, Fascist Italy was different from the western materialist and capitalist countries that the Asian nationalists hated, since it had inherited the spiritual and cultural qualities of ancient Rome. It was thanks to this tradition that Italy would be able to develop stronger political relations and create a new unity between Europe and Asia.

In the context of this new engagement in Asia, functional to projecting an image of a civilizing colonialism inherently different to that of the old western powers such as the United Kingdom, Marco Polo was evoked by Fascist propaganda as a powerful symbol of Italy's historical capacity to weave dialogue and cooperation with the East. Giovanni Gentile himself, speaking at the IsMEO inauguration, mentioned how the institute had to serve the Italian youth's outlook towards "l'Oriente antichissimo e sempre attuale, di cui un Italiano mercante ardimentoso e geniale, scrittore mirabile d'ingenuità e di prudenza, fu primo a scrivere in Occidente" (V. V. and U. F. 1934, 18).[4] With these words, he recalled old tropes and stereotypes about Marco Polo as a champion of trade and science, while also connecting his example to the need to expand Italy's global economic and cultural presence.

During the Fascist era, Marco Polo's portrait was often based on a prototype of the "Italian expat". This had a double meaning, as the regime saw Italians abroad as "explorers" and "migrant workers", both characterized by their "audacity" and their indissoluble link with the motherland (Pretelli 2008).

In fact, since the early years of the Fascist regime, travel literature and political propaganda had portrayed Marco Polo as a hero embodying all the qualities of the new Italians: ready to conquer the world and find their place in China thanks to their capacities and values, and not military and economic power (De Giorgi 2010; Basilone 2019).

A perfect example is the chapter dedicated to Marco Polo by Mario Appelius (1892–1946), one of the voices of the regime, but also a restless traveller, in one of his several travel reports on China and Asia (he lived in China for almost two years in the mid-1920s). In his book published in 1926 (Appelius 1926) and dedicated to Nicola Bonservizi, a regime journalist and exponent of the Fasci killed by an anarchist two years earlier in Paris, Appelius describes his visit to the temple of Canton where the original statue of Marco Polo was "venerated" by the Chinese. Contemplating the statue of his compatriot in that exotic temple, the

[4] "[…] an ancient and still present Orient, of which a brave and smart Italian merchant, and talented writer full of ingenuousness and foresight, was the first to write in the West."

journalist let himself "assaporare il fascino dolce di questo ambiente d'Estremo Levante [...] in compagnia di messer Marco Polo" and offered his readership a flowery Orientalist fantasy, filled with nationalist pride:

> Scrittori stranieri si sono recentemente dati la pena di sottoporre questa statua di Marco Polo ad un rigoroso esame di sartoria storica, per contestare l'autenticità del personaggio e svalutare così l'omaggio reso dall'Estremo Oriente attraverso Marco Polo alla razza italiana. Dottissimi tedeschi hanno dimostrato con una critica serrata delle cuciture e delle bottoniere che l'abbigliamento di questo Marco Polo non è veneziano ma corrisponde al vestito adoperato dai portoghesi nel XVI secolo. Bravissimo, "her [*sic*] Professor"! Ciò non toglie però che le cronache antiche di Canton e gli inventarii imperiali parlino chiaramente di una statua di Marco Polo nella pagoda dei Cinquecento Genii e che il Buddha dell'Occidente sia venerato proprio sotto tal nome dal popolino di Kuang-Ceu-Fu. Io che non m'intendo né d'occhielli trecenteschi né di risvolti dei seicento, sono con la leggenda dei secoli e con la tradizione delle genti. Italiano, m'inchino riverente dinanzi all'effige di questo grande uomo della mia terra, divinizzato dalle razze dell'Oriente. [...] I suoi scritti sono tuttora il più grande documento che il mondo occidentale possegga sull'antica Cina. Ed il suo libro ha un contenuto così universale che ancora oggi la Cina parla al nostro spirito come i suoi occhi la videro e come la sua anima la sentì: un miraggio di ricchezza, uno scenario di raffinata bellezza, un caos di umanità! (Appelius 1926, 131–33).[5]

Appelius's polemical argument against the "foreign scholars" underlines the hyper-nationalist discourse on Marco Polo typical of the age. In his words, Polo embodies Italian identity as a "complessa figura di navigatore e di mercante, di diplomatico e d'artista, di gran signore e di uomo politico" (Appelius 1926, 135), summing up all the features of

> [la] nostra gente avventurosa e abile, audace e positiva, sempre signorile anche nella povertà; gente che il difficile attira ed il complicato seduce, che sempre ha offerto il suo braccio ad ogni impresa temeraria e sempre ebbe per confini ai

[5] "[...] enjoy the sweet charm of this Far Eastern setting [...] in the company of Messer Marco Polo! [...] Recently some foreign writers have taken the trouble to submit this statue of Marco Polo to a rigorous examination of historical dressmaking, in order to contest the authenticity of the character and thus devalue the homage paid to the Italian race by the Far East through Marco Polo. Closely criticizing the seams and buttons, German scholars have shown that the clothing of this Marco Polo is not Venetian but corresponds to the dress used by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Very good 'Herr Professor'! However, the fact remains that the ancient chronicles of Canton and the imperial inventories clearly speak of a statue of Marco Polo in the pagoda of the Five Hundred Gods and that the Buddha of the West is venerated by that name by the populace of Canton. I, who do not understand either fourteenth-century eyelets or seventeenth-century lapels, am with the legend of the centuries and the tradition of the peoples. As an Italian, I bow reverently to the effigy of this great man of my land, deified by the races of the East. [...] His writings are still the greatest document on ancient China possessed by the western world. And his book has such a universal content that China still speaks to our spirit as his eyes saw it and how his soul felt it: a mirage of wealth, a scenery of refined beauty, a chaos of humanity!".

> suoi voli i limiti stessi del mondo. Il suo spirito proteiforme, capace di sentire il linguaggio divino della poesia e nello stesso tempo d'afferrare il lato pratico della vita, era tipicamente italiano. Quelle svariate doti che caratterizzano la sua personalità straordinaria sono in fondo le medesime qualità fondamentali dei mille e mille italiani che ieri ancora s'avventuravano oltre le frontiere della patria col semplice patrimonio delle loro risorse spirituali per farsi largo in mezzo al tumulto delle genti, che oggi partono pei mari e per le terre con una visione radiosa d'imperio nei cuori e nelle fronti. Sotto tale aspetto Marco Polo meriterebbe di essere maggiormente celebrato dalla nostra razza, perché veramente egli riassume nella sua sagoma ciclopica parecchie delle virtù basilari della stirpe! (Appelius 1926, 136).[6]

At the same time, Marco Polo became the symbol of migrants, emphasizing the Italian entrepreneurial and adventurous spirit, as well as the indissoluble bond with the motherland (Appelius 1926, 138).

At any rate, in Fascist discourse, the construction of Marco Polo as an icon of Italian identity founded on its people's capacity to expand outside the national borders was often matched by stress on the Venetian merchant's "Fascist" qualities of boldness and audacity. For example, in the same year, when Appelius fantasized about Italy's destiny before the statue of Polo in the Canton temple, the far more powerful Venetian Count of Misurata Giuseppe Volpi (1877–1947), and then minister of finances, did not refrain from celebrating Marco Polo on the occasion of the commemoration of the Colombian enterprise in Genoa. Volpi's speech was duly publicized by the press. The literary journal *L'eloquenza* provided it with a telling introductory note by the anonymous editor:

> Alla gloria del grande Cristoforo è stata unita anche quella di un altro famoso irrequieto, uno di quei fantastici vagamondi che, nei secoli passati, a cominciare dall'alba della civiltà, hanno portato il nome italiano fin nelle contrade più ermetiche e lontane, fra genti misteriose e favoleggiate: vogliamo dire Marco Polo, l'autore del *Milione*, lo scopritore della Persia, l'amico del Kan dei Tartari, il più grande viaggiatore del mondo (*Conferenze, discorsi e prolusioni* 1926, 663–64).[7]

6 "[…] a complex figure of navigator and merchant, diplomat and artist, gentleman and politician […] our adventurous and skilled, daring and positive people, always noble even in poverty; a people that attract difficulties and seduce the complicated, who have always offered their hand to every daring undertaking and whose flight has always been limited by the bounds of the world itself. With his protean spirit, capable of hearing the divine language of poetry and at the same time of grasping the practical side of life, he was typically Italian. These various qualities that characterize his extraordinary personality are basically the same fundamental qualities as the thousands and thousands of Italians who yesterday still ventured beyond the frontiers of their homeland with the simple wealth of their spiritual resources in order to make room among the tumult of people, who today set out by land and sea with a radiant vision of empire in their hearts and minds. In this respect Marco Polo deserves to be celebrated more by our race, because his cyclopean profile truly summarizes many of the essential virtues of our lineage!"

7 "The great Christopher's glory has been matched by the glory of another great restless personality, one of those fantastic wanderers who, in past centuries since the dawn of civili-

And, as Appelius rejected any scientific considerations as to the attribution of the westerner's statue in Canton, Volpi himself was also vocal in emphasizing how the patriotic significance of Marco Polo made any literary or academic discussion irrelevant:

> Cosa ci interesse se il testo originale del 'Milione' sia stato scritto veramente in lingua d''oil' da Rusticiano, od in veneto dal Polo stesso [...] od in latino, purché ci abbiano tramandato così grandi cose? Cosa ci interessa che i ritratti che si trovano di Marco Polo non siano veri [...]? Cosa ci interessa il giorno preciso della sua morte [...]? Sappiamo che ha testato nel 1324 ed accettiamo reverenti nel suo assieme tutto quello che c'è, anche di leggenda, nella sua storia, perché è storia di un grande pioniere, di un'epoca, di una vittoria italiana (Volpi 1926, 528).[8]

Whereas Volpi's choice to focus on Marco Polo could be read as a historical claim to the special role of Venice in Italian modernization and expansion in the Mediterranean and the East (Sarzani 1972; Donadon 2019), his rhetoric mainly set out to make Polo a reference for modern Italian explorations:

> Questo è Marco Polo, audace veneziano, intrepido italiano di questa nostra Italia che ha saputo e saprà nei secoli tenere dovunque il pallio, in ispecie dove sia necessario ardimento, cuore saldo, genialità, devozione illimitata alla Patria. È per la sua Venezia che ha scritto da Genova Marco Polo, e l'Italia ha mantenuto le sue tradizioni intatte adattandole ai tempi, ma con lo stesso pensiero e con lo stesso cuore. Marco Polo, Cristoforo Colombo, Amerigo Vespucci [...] non disdegnate chi vi ha sostituito nel portare il nome d'Italia attraverso il mondo. Questa nostra gente, dopo la più grande guerra che il mondo abbia sofferto e che ha saputo vincere per le sue virtù, ha lanciato nello spazio la sua fede, la sua bandiera. Giovani aviere veneto, Arturo Ferrarin, tu hai portato sulle ali nuovamente il ricordo di Marco Polo a Cambaluc e laggiù hanno posto il tuo ricordo vicino al suo. Francesco De Pinedo, sulla tua piccola nave, con le ali, tu hai segnato in brevi memorabili giorni alcune delle tappe che Marco Polo dovette segnare in lunghi anni. Tu, Umberto Nobile, hai per ultimo reso attonito il mondo con la tua doppia audacia di costruttore e di conduttore, ed hai violato l'immensità dei ghiacci artici (Volpi 1926, 529).[9]

zation, have borne the name of Italy even in the most hermetic and distant places, among mysterious and fabulous people: we mean Marco Polo, author of *The Travels*, discoverer of Persia, friend of the khan of the Tartars, the greatest traveller in the world."

8 "What interest is it to us if it was actually written in the 'Oïl' language by Rusticiano or in Venetian by Polo himself [...] or in Latin, as long as he has handed down such great things to us? What interest is it to us that the portraits that are found of Marco Polo are not true [...]? What interest is it to us the precise day of his death [...]? We know that he made his last will in 1324 and we reverently accept as a whole everything there is in his history, even that which is legend, because it is the story of a great pioneer, an era and an Italian victory."

9 "This is Marco Polo, a daring Venetian, an intrepid Italian of this Italy of ours that has and will be able to hold the flag everywhere over the centuries, especially where it is necessary to have a steadfast heart, genius and an unlimited devotion to the homeland. It was for his home Venice that Marco Polo wrote in Genoa, and Italy has kept his legacy intact by

Both popular literature and Fascist propaganda discourse converged in the actualization of Marco Polo's figure as a heroic model for Italians, emphasizing his love for adventure but also for the motherland and his will to serve it. The Venetian merchant's heroism could certainly have been the primary quality of the modern explorers mentioned by Volpi, the audacious protagonists of Italy's international competition in the age of modern travel and discovery. Not only that, it was to be the primary quality of the migrants and colonial expats who were called to play a fundamental role in Italy's projection abroad. In this sense, the evocation of his memory served to give them a historical identity and include them in the great national community within and outside Italy's borders.

In some cases, Marco Polo's legacy was deliberately connected to the experience of Italian pioneers on the African continent and the need to spread popular awareness and support for Italy's colonial enterprise as inscribed in the nation's historical destiny (*Rassegna d'Oltremare* 1942). In this respect, it is interesting to note the attempt if not to attribute the label of "colonial literature" to Marco Polo's *Travels*, but at least to list the book—like all of the works of other Italian explorers, such as Columbus and Pigafetta—in the cultural genealogy of the development of the so-called Italian colonial literature (Tomasello 1984). As writer and literary critic Alfredo Panzini (1869–1939) wrote in a debate on the topic hosted by the magazine *L'Azione Coloniale* in 1931:

> E quanto a letteratura coloniale non si potrebbe anche leggere il *Milione* di Marco Polo, i viaggi del Pigafetta, e le relazioni dei nostri viaggiatori e scopritori d'Africa del secolo scorso? E navigatori polari? E transvolatori oceanici? La storia comincia domani. Siamo d'accordo, ma le sue radici devono essere profonde nelle tradizioni e nel passato (Tomasello 1984, 122).[10]

The status of Marco Polo's book as "colonial literature" and of Marco Polo as a precursor of Italian civilizing colonialism is certainly highly debatable. However, just its mention was evidence of a political and cultural climate where reading *The Travels* could not be confined to the endeavours of philologists and literature scholars or to the pleasures of the lovers of exotic adventures and romance.

adapting it to the times, but with the same thought and with the same heart. Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, [...] do not disdain those who have replaced you in taking the name of Italy throughout the world. After the greatest war the world has suffered and was able to win thanks to his virtues, these people of ours have launched his faith and his flag into the space. Young Venetian airman, Arturo Ferrarin, on your wings you once again took the memory of Marco Polo to Cambaluc, and there they placed your memory close to his. Francesco De Pinedo, on your little winged ship, in short memorable days you traced some of the stages that Marco Polo had to trace over many years. And you, Umberto Nobile, last but not least, you stunned the world with your double audacity as a constructor and a conductor, and violated the immensity of the Arctic glaciers."

10 "And as for colonial literature, could we not also read Marco Polo's *Travels*, Pigafetta's travels, and the reports of our travellers and discoverers of Africa in the last century? And the polar navigators? And the aviators across the oceans? History begins tomorrow. We all agree, but its roots should be deep in tradition and the past."

It is no coincidence that one of the best-known cases of Fascist censorship, from 1939, concerned a Hollywood film on Marco Polo directed by Archie Mayo, starring Gary Cooper in the role of the hero. The Italian version of the film titled *The Adventures of Marco Polo* became the bizarre "*Uno scozzese alla corte del Gran Kan*" (*A Scotsman at the Court of the Great Khan*). The change was imposed by the Fascist censors because the portrait of the Venetian traveller in the film was reputed not appropriate for Polo's heroic image. In the plot, he falls in love with Princess Kukachin, whom he had to take to Persia to meet her new husband, something that was indeed also suggested in popular narratives. But it was not a tolerable story in a popular film, and only after the end of the war was the original title restored (Brunetta 2014).

The ideological dimension of the readings of Marco Polo in connection with the representation of Italian modern identity in the world was also evident in fields of academic research more closely connected to the regime's colonial enterprise, such as geography. The biography of Marco Polo written by Giotto Dainelli (1878–1968), an eminent personality in the field of geographical and geological research, reflects the penetration of propaganda discourse, even in scholarly and scientific works. Dainelli was an academic and explorer, with extensive experience in Africa, central Asia and Tibet, who was very close to the Fascist regime and active in academic divulgation. His biography of Polo was published in 1941 and included in an educational series titled *Biographies of Great Italians*, which began with Scipio the African and ended with Mussolini.

Dainelli's knowledge of Marco Polo's book was that of a geographer, and his biography was undoubtedly based on accurate philological works, such as Benedetto's edition of *The Travels* published in 1928. However, his narrative of Marco Polo's life was punctuated by considerations about his subject's character as a symbol of the best Italian virtues. In spite of his intention to offer a sober portrait of the Venetian traveller, Dainelli did not refrain from the rhetoric of Italianness so dear to the regime. His Marco Polo is a merchant driven by curiosity, endowed with physical strength, courage and practical sense, and a fine observer, a portrait matching the national pride for the figure. Framing his judgment of Marco Polo in a scholarly discussion that had developed one century earlier, Dainelli argued against the scepticism of German medievalist K. D. Hüllman, who in 1829 had affirmed that the book was just "an ecclesiastic fiction" (Larner 1999, 175). Conversely, he complacently reported Alexander von Humboldt's admiration for the Venetian. In Dainelli's words, Marco Polo was the "Italian" pioneer of the discovery of Asia as well as paving the way for other Italian travellers and explorers, from Columbus to Pigafetta, whose Italianness he also celebrated.

> [Marco Polo] deve essere esempio a quanti sappiano, o sentano soltanto—ma senza praticare quanto sentono o sanno—che gloria e potenza, ricchezza e fama, a se stessi ed alla propria terra, si acquistano non col vivere quieto e inoperoso, ma con una intraprendenza, magari un poco avventurosa, ma sorretta da una volontà salda e intelligente. Dice, in sul principio—il libro di Marco—dei suoi

> maggiori: "erano senza dubbio alcuno nobili, savi e prudenti." Degnissime qualità anche queste, certamente: non sufficienti, però, per raggiungere quella gloria che a Marco è venuta—e per Marco a Venezia e all'Italia tutta—per l'eternità (Dainelli 1941, 236).[11]

3. Marco Polo's ghost in Sino-Italian relations

The Fascist regime's discourse about Marco Polo and his legacy in terms of Italy's destiny in China was essentially aimed at the domestic public opinion. It was a self-referential reading, consistent with the mass nationalist pedagogy, colonial aspirations and the cult of heroes promoted by Fascism.

During these decades, Marco Polo remained a vivid presence and ghost haunting Italian nationalist dreams in China. His name still punctuated the attempt to provide evidence of Italy's colonial identity there. In 1929, a monumental fountain dedicated to the Venetian traveller and the "pioneers" of Italianness in the world was built in the Tianjin concession's main square, Piazza Regina Elena, a place dominated by the monument to the victory and Italian casualties of the First World War (Marinelli 2008). After a few years, Italians in China chose to christen their magazine published in Shanghai during the Second World War as *Il Marco Polo*. The magazine's cover features the image of Polo beside a portrait of the emperor he served, Kublai Khan, maybe wanting to suggest a privileged friendship and collaboration between Italy and China. *Il Marco Polo* published essays on eastern culture and politics and information on Fascist Italy but does not seem to have had any significance in the cultural relations between the two countries, not least because at the time of its publication Italy was allied with the occupying Japan.

However, if observed from the perspective of Rome's expectations of gaining a stronger and more distinctive role in China, the celebration of the Venetian merchant as a model for Italy's attitude towards China was destined to remain empty rhetoric. The glorious historical memory of Marco Polo hinted towards an Italian destiny in China and Asia, but it actually clashed with the reality of Italy's weak position in the economic and cultural geopolitics of the region, something that the goodwill of Fascist diplomacy was not able to change.

During his travels to China in 1932, writer and journalist Giovanni Comisso (1895–1969) bluntly pointed out the reality of the situation, describing the same statue that, a few years earlier, had inspired Appelius's dream of greatness:

[11] "[Marco Polo] must be an example to those who are aware, or at least feel—but without putting these feelings and awareness into practice—that glory and power, wealth and fame for the sake of themselves and their homeland, cannot be acquired through quiet and idle living, but only through initiative, maybe a little adventurous, but supported by a strong and intelligent will. At the beginning of his book, Marco says of his elders that 'they were noble, wise and prudent without doubt'. These are very worthy qualities too: however, they certainly are not sufficient to achieve that glory that came to Marco, and through Marco to Venice and all Italy, for eternity."

> Sembra fatto di pietra serena, un po' impolverata: due grandi divinità dorate e dipinte di verde e di rosso stanno elevate tra le colonnine della tettoia a guardia della porta. Il bonzo apre. Nella fresca penombra appaiono allineati e seduti su sopraelevature di pietra lungo le pareti innumerevoli gli iddii dorati o rossastri dalle larghe facce sorridenti, dai ventri ampi, segno di saggezza, in attitudini estatiche, affabili o minacciose. Marco Polo è un po' dietro all'altare, il primo d'una fila. Eccolo, tarchiato, col cappello di feltro all'europea e mantello sulle spalle, le mani in atto di spiegare. Un bel volto massiccio di viaggiatore a piedi, con la barba ricciuta che gli circonda il collo come un collarino. Gli hanno orientalizzato naso e orecchi. Davanti a lui bruciano i bastoncini di sandalo offerti dai fedeli. Come non compiere con devozione pure noi quest'offerta? Ma come non sentir pena? Nessun commerciante italiano in questa Canton famelica di merci europee: solo lui della nostra razza, qui da secoli ad attendere nella sua serena, sorridente, dorata imagine di iddio. Egli il primo europeo in Cina, amato per le sue opere, viceré imperiale, maestro di pazienza e di sicurezza nelle sue marce infinite, pare che dica: 'Venite, la strada è dura, ma vi farò da guida' (Comisso 1930).[12]

Fascist propaganda hoped that the memory of Marco Polo could inspire Italians' entrepreneurial spirit in China as well as offer a shared historical legitimacy to Rome's plan to strengthen Sino-Italian relations. But was the image of Fascist Italy as a good and friendly colonial power somehow more legitimized in China by the recognition of Polo's legacy? Was Rome's diplomatic activism symbolically perceived as a modern re-enactment of a historical role in China too? Were the Chinese sensitive to Marco Polo as an inspiring model for Sino-Italian relations? The truth of the matter is that Marco Polo's memory and image could hardly work as an instrument of Italian cultural diplomacy in China, where the cultural and intellectual meaning of *The Travels* in the history of the relations between Italy and China had only just begun to be understood (Gu 2006).

In spite of the Italian assumption that he was venerated in the Canton temple, the Venetian was unknown in China until westerners told of his travels and experiences in the second half of the nineteenth century (Vinci 2018, 2020), and

12 "It seems to be made of stone, a little dusty: two great gilded divinities painted in green and red stand tall between the columns of the canopy guarding the door. The bonze opens. In the cool twilight countless golden or reddish gods with broad smiling faces, broad bellies, a sign of wisdom, in ecstatic, affable or threatening attitudes appear lined up and seated on stone elevations along the walls. Marco Polo is a little behind the altar, the first in a row. There he is, stocky, with a European hat and cloak over his shoulders, his hands in the act of explaining. The good, sturdy face of a foot traveller, with a curly beard that encircles his neck like a collar. They have orientalized his nose and ears. Before him the sandal sticks offered by the believers burn. How can we too not make this offering with devotion? But how can you not feel sorry? No Italian merchant in this Canton hungry for European goods: only he of our race, here for centuries waiting in his serene, smiling, golden image of god. He was the first European in China, loved for his works, imperial viceroy, master of patience and safety in his endless marches, and he seems to say: 'Come, the road is tough, but I will guide you'."

for a long time afterwards, he essentially only remained a topic of interest for a few scholars educated in the West.

The first translation of *The Travels* was published by Wei Yi in 1913. Other editions followed from French and English translations, such as those by Pauthier and Yule, in the 1920s and 1930s. Reflecting Italy's weak position in the Chinese cultural environment, Italian Polian studies played a minor role in this enterprise. When one of the main Chinese translations of *The Travels* was published by Zhang Xinlong in 1937, the Italian community in Shanghai commented in this way:

> Recentemente è stata pubblicata una traduzione in cinese di quest'opera che già godeva una larga popolarità tra i lettori di tutto il mondo. Seppure l'edizione non ha pretese tipografiche tuttavia il volume è dotato di belle fotografie ed è corredato di ampie notizie e riferimenti sugli studiosi italiani e stranieri delle vicende avventurose del primo e grande messaggero dell'Italianità in Estremo Oriente (*Il Marco Polo* 1939, 169).[13]

Actually, in his introduction, Zhang fully acknowledged the work of Luigi Foscolo Benedetto, whose translation into English—together with Yule's—had been the basis of his own translation into Chinese. Zhang, who had been educated in the West, even mentions his contact with Italian scholars and some discussions on textual and translation issues (Zhang 1937), but it was a transnational academic dialogue which had little to do with the acknowledgment of Marco Polo as "primo e grande messaggero dell'Italianità in Estremo Oriente".[14] China's main interest in *The Travels* was connected to its usefulness as a source regarding the country's own history and the history of Christianity in China (Gu 2006). Chinese travellers in Italy, and in Venice, may have been aware of the Venetian's experience, but in the age of colonialism and imperialism, the primacy of Italy in Sino-Western relations could not really imply a special relationship. Moreover, after the Japanese occupation of China in 1937, the alliance between Italy and Japan negatively impacted on any developments in this field.

The foundation of the People's Republic in 1949 and the anti-imperialist turn in Chinese historical studies did not help to consolidate the fame of Marco Polo's book in China. In the 1950s, the impression of Italian travellers visiting the People's Republic was that Marco Polo, proudly celebrated by so many as their tutelary deity in the (re)discovery of the East, was barely known to their hosts (Cassola 1956). It was only in the 1970s, with China once again eager to develop its contacts with the West, and Italy, that the academic study of *The Travels* in China resumed (Gu 2006) and Marco Polo also began to settle into the Chinese popular imaginary as

[13] "A Chinese translation of this work was recently published and had already enjoyed wide popularity among readers around the world. Although the edition has no typographical pretensions, the volume has beautiful photographs, and it is accompanied by extensive information and bibliographical references to Italian and foreign scholars of the adventurous events of the first and great messenger of Italianness in the Far East."

[14] "[...] the first and great messenger of Italianness in the Far East."

"the" icon of relations with the West and Italy in particular. Indeed, in 1982, the first television co-production between Italy and China (among others), directed by Giuliano Montaldo, was the series *Marco Polo* (Vicentini 1992)—a sign of the new actualization of this historical figure for the sake of Sino-Italian diplomacy.

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